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ABSTRACT

Women returners now account for over one-third of the total labor force, but the British labor market remains strongly segregated by gender, with over 85 percent of all employed women in the service industries. A high proportion are employed part time. Despite a majority of women now returning to the labor market after breaks for childbirth and caring responsibilities, the reentry process is not always straightforward and many experience a range of barriers and problems: lack of child care; lack of information, advice, and practical help; loss of contact with the labor market; downward mobility; lack of recognition of existing experience and skills; limited training opportunities; and lack of support during the reentry process. Reasons many women return to work without preparatory training include the following: insufficient information and guidance on opportunities; insufficient training programs; domestic constraints; financial constraints; psychological barriers; and disincentives caused by women's position in the labor market. Types of education and training programs for women returning to education and training are as follows: updating; reorientation; positive action programs offering nontraditional training; informal, community-based learning activities; and preparatory programs. Providers include Training and Enterprise Councils and women's projects and centers. Returners have some shared needs: information and advice, broad and appropriate training programs, and practical support. (Contains 44 references.) (YLB)

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ED 429 205

# RETURNING WOMEN

## *Their training and employment choices and needs*

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NIACE

# Returning women

## *Their training and employment choices and needs*

Veronica McGivney

NIACE
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# Acknowledgement

The overview is based on a study of women returners commissioned by Heart of England Training and Enterprise Council in 1995 and subsequently updated to take account of more recent labour market data and research studies. The original study was part of a National Development Prospectus project on individual commitment run by the TEC on behalf of the Department for Education and Employment and managed by Oxfordshire County Council. The objective was to explore the findings of research into the learning needs of women returners and to use the results in developing innovative learning programmes for this group at a later stage in the project. I am grateful to the Heart of England TEC and Oxford County Council for their permission to publish the study.

NIACE is grateful to the Women's National Commission for permission to reproduce the cover of their report 'Returner Employment Potential'.

*Chapter 1*

# Introduction: the economic context

For the purposes of this study women returners are defined as women who have taken time out of the labour market (often termed a 'career break') usually for maternity reasons and wish to return to paid employment, education or training. Such women differ widely in age, qualification level, personal circumstances and occupational background. They therefore have diverse aspirations and preparation needs. Depending on their family circumstances, they may have already moved in and out of the labour market on several occasions. 'Returning' is not therefore a simple process that happens just once and which is the same for all women:

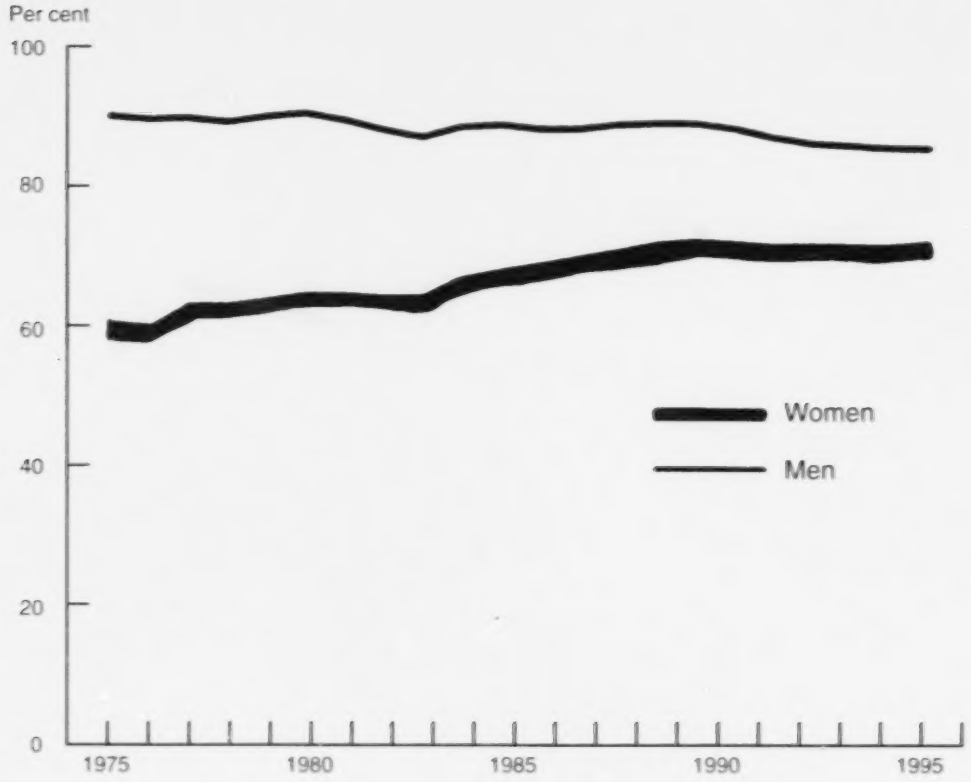
> *Few women with children experience the neatly packaged rhythms implied by the terms 'career break' and 'woman returner' (i.e. full-time waged work followed by a period of economic inactivity in childcare and then a full return to waged work). Most women spend many years in discontinuous cycles moving in and out of the labour market and voluntary work while balancing domestic responsibilities. Many will be 'returners' on a number of occasions* (DeBell, 1994).

All studies suggest that the majority of women who have withdrawn from, or never entered, the labour market for family reasons, intend eventually to seek paid employment. The reasons are predominantly financial although many women are also motivated by the desire to interact with other people, to lead a more stimulating life, to develop wider interests or to pursue a particular career (Clarke, 1991; Dow Stoker, 1991; Chwarae Teg, 1992; Ryan and Vause Associates, 1993).

Women's relationship with the labour market reflects changing social mores and economic conditions. It is now far more common for women with young children to take paid employment than it was several decades ago, and their periods of withdrawal from the labour market are generally shorter than in the past. Between 1979 and 1988 the proportion of women returning to the labour force within nine months of giving birth increased by over 25 per cent. It has been claimed that few other western countries show such a sharp drop in employment rate among women of childbearing age and such a marked increase in employment rates in subsequent years (Dale and Glover, 1990).

The increased labour market participation of women with children is part of the general increase in women's employment that has taken place in the last two decades. Since the 1970s, the number of women engaged in paid employment in Britain has increased considerably (Figure 1). Between June 1986 and June 1996 their number in the labour force rose by 1.3 million, compared with an increase of 0.2 million for men. In the same period, the economic activity rate for women with children under the age of five rose from 40 per cent to 54 per cent. By the summer

**Figure 1:** Trends in Economic Activity, 1975–96




Source: Labour Force Surveys 1975–1996, Spring quarters

of 1997 there were 10.7 million women employees accounting for 47 per cent of the total labour force (DfEE, 1998a; Sly, Price and Risdon 1997).

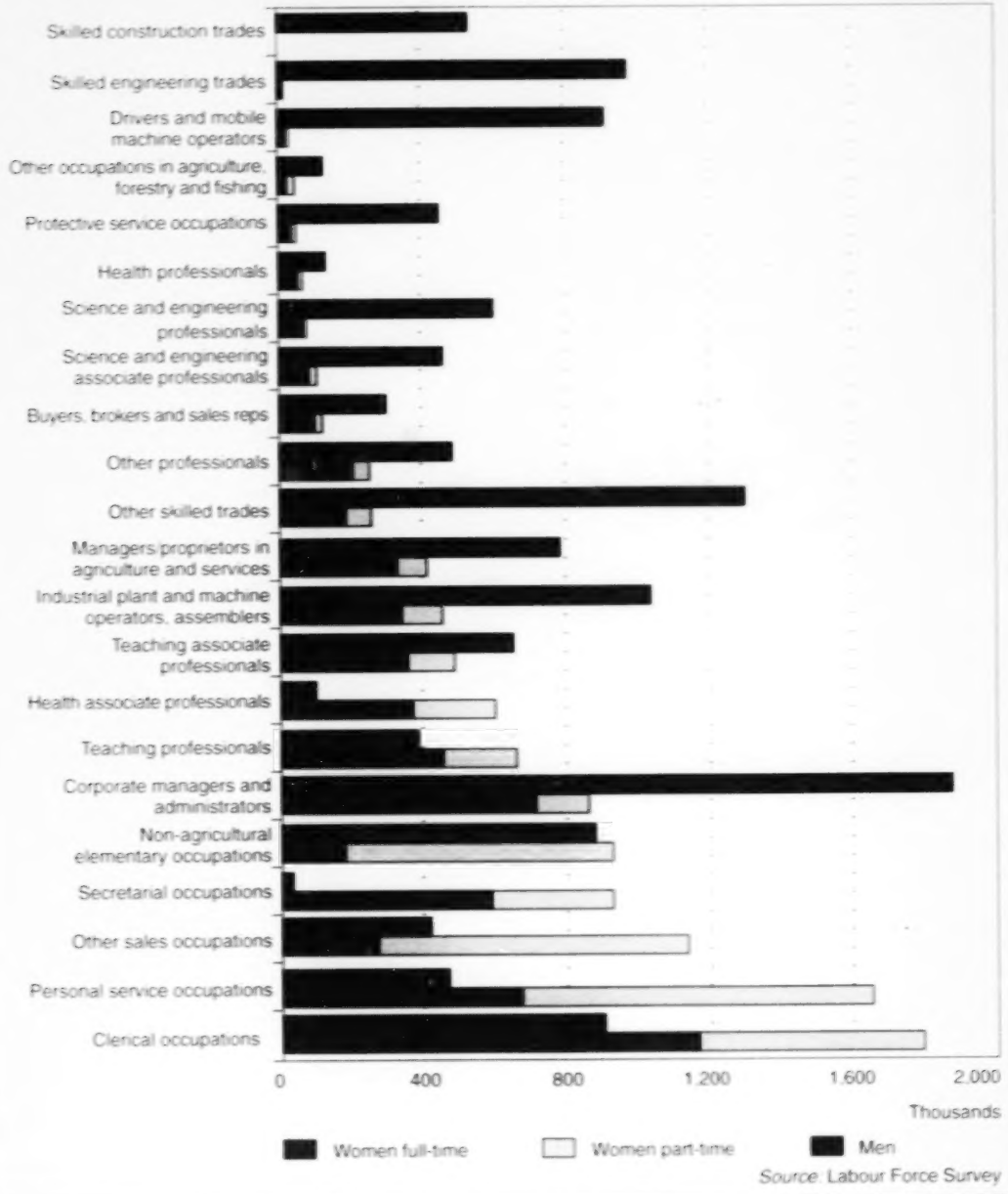
Women returners now account for over a third of the total labour force. Their re-entry to the labour market has been facilitated by two continuing trends: the increasing importance of the service sector and the growth in part-time employment and casualised (temporary, fixed term, agency or seasonal) employment.

## Occupational sectors

The British labour market remains strongly segregated by gender. Over 85 per cent of all employed women work in the service industries and over 50 per cent are in three major occupational groups — clerical/secretarial, personal and protective services and sales. Only 18 per cent of employed men work in these occupations (Sly, Price and Risdon, 1997). (Figure 2)

Studies of women returners reflect this picture, showing that the majority of economically inactive women aged over 25 have formerly worked in, and tend to return to, traditionally female occupational areas such as clerical and secretarial, personal services, retail sales, administration, nursing, teaching and the caring professions (CBI, 1989; Dow Stoker, 1991; Chwarae Teg, 1992; Ryan and Vause Associates, 1993). Typically, over 80 per cent of women returners who participated in TEC-funded *Fieldstart* courses in Tyneside subsequently moved into clerical or secretarial jobs, administration, retail sales, education services or the caring occupations (*Focus on Women Consultancy*, 1994).

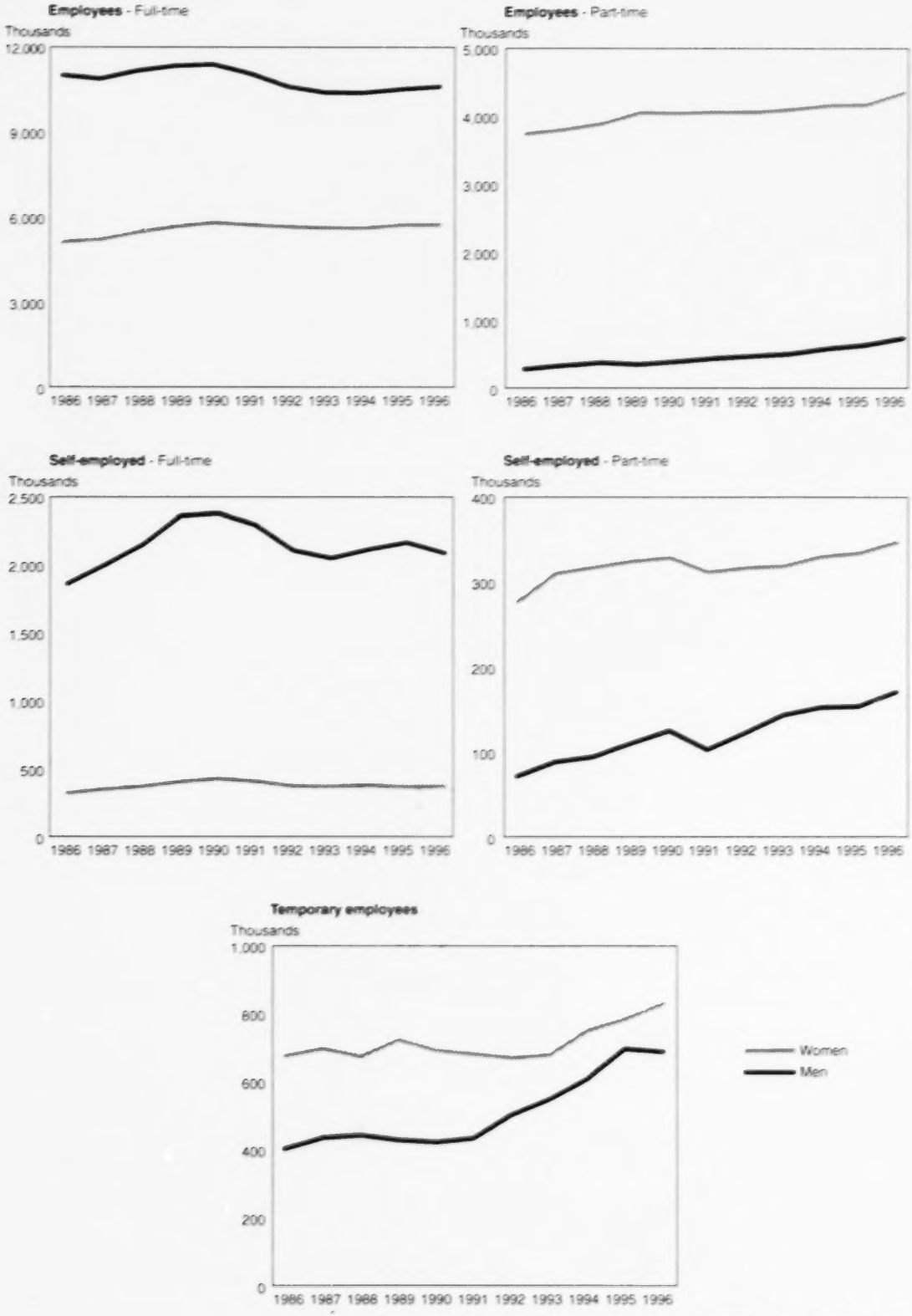
**Figure 2:** Numbers of women and men of working age in employment by occupation, Great Britain: spring 1996 (not seasonally adjusted)




## Part-time and temporary work

As Figure 2 shows, a high proportion of women are employed on a part-time basis. The majority of the new jobs created since the early 1980s have been part-time and taken by women who now account for about 84 per cent of all part-time workers. In spring 1996, 44 per cent of all women in paid employment and over 60 per cent of employed women with dependent children, were working part-time, the majority in the service sector, especially retail, hotels and catering, repairs and other services. Many were also working in firms with fewer than 25 employees (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1993). Many part-time women workers are employed on a temporary basis. Between 1986 and 1996, the number of women in temporary employment increased by 23 per cent (Sly, Price and Risdon, 1997). (Figure 3)

**Figure 3:** Components of the labour force, working age, Great Britain; 1986–1996 (not seasonally adjusted)

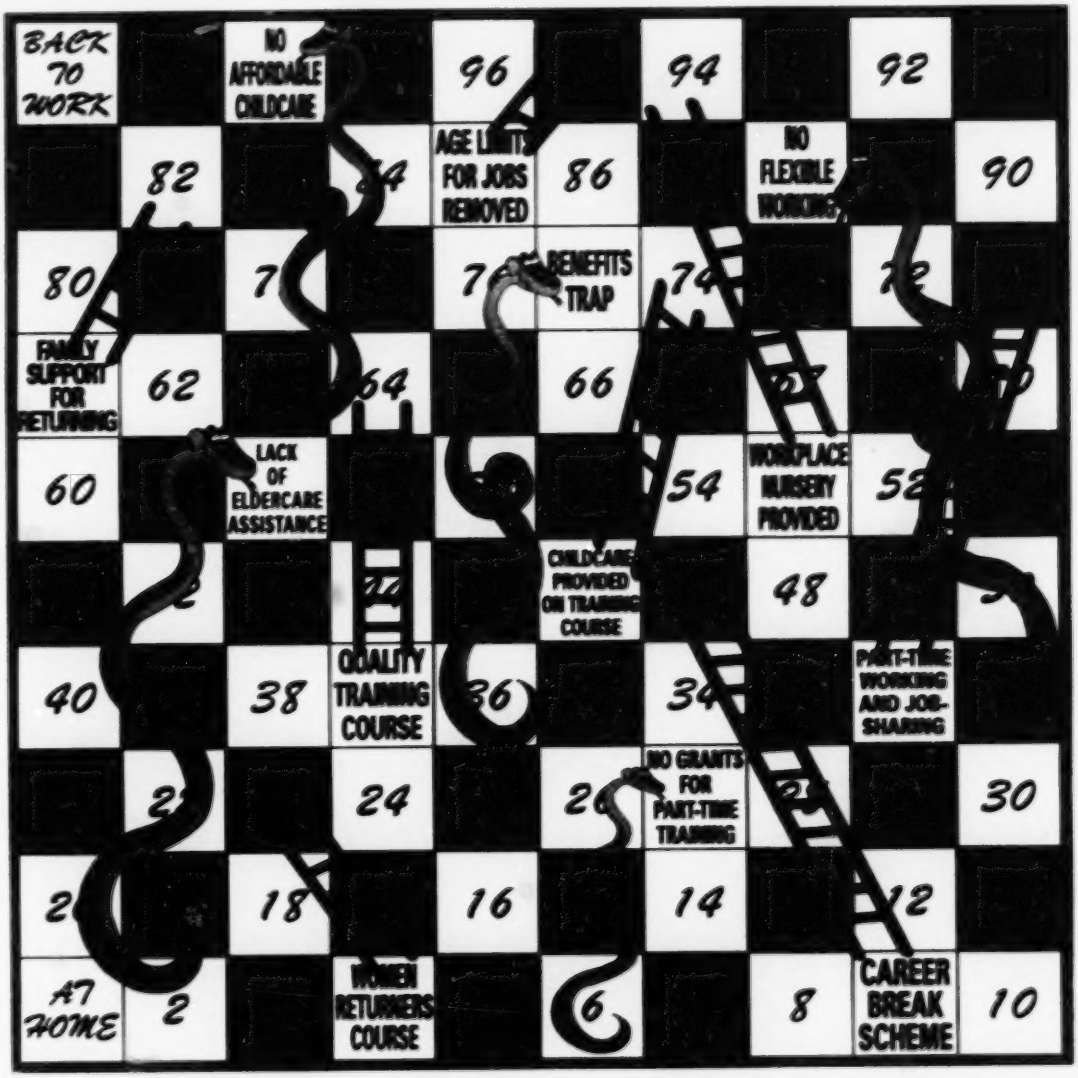



*Source:* Labour Force Survey

A study of women returning to employment in Hampshire (Dow Stoker, 1991) identified three different groups:

- *The traditional type*: women who return to work part-time after childbirth, mainly in low-paid clerical and administrative jobs;
- *The transitional type*: women who return to work part-time but who wish to develop a career and to retrain;
- *The new type*: women who resume careers after a maternity break, returning, often full-time, to a job similar to the one they left. They are likely to have one child under 3 and to be aged 25–34.

The evidence suggests that most returners belong to the first two categories and that many experience some difficulties in finding work that fits their circumstances and aspirations. Some of these are illustrated below.




*Source*: Women's National Commission, 1991

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*Chapter 2*

# Returning to the workplace

Despite the fact that a majority of women now return to the labour market after breaks for childbirth and caring responsibilities, the re-entry process is not always straightforward and many experience a range of barriers and problems.

## Lack of childcare

A key factor determining whether women return to work full- or part-time is the age of their youngest dependent child (Table 1 and Figure 4). Although many women say they prefer to work part-time, this is often the only viable option open to them (Watson and Fothergill, 1993). Britain has a very poor record of providing childcare facilities for under-fives and after-school and holiday care facilities for young children of school age (although provision of the latter has increased significantly in recent years). As a result, studies suggest that few mothers of young children, other than those with professional qualifications, are able or willing to consider a journey to work lasting more than 30 minutes. Thus their employment choices are restricted to whatever short-term and part-time jobs are available in the immediate locality: *"The choice for many women is not between typical or atypical employment but between atypical work or no paid work at all"* (Dickens, 1992).

**Table 1:** Employment rates by age of youngest dependent child and age, people of working age: spring 1996 (not seasonally adjusted)

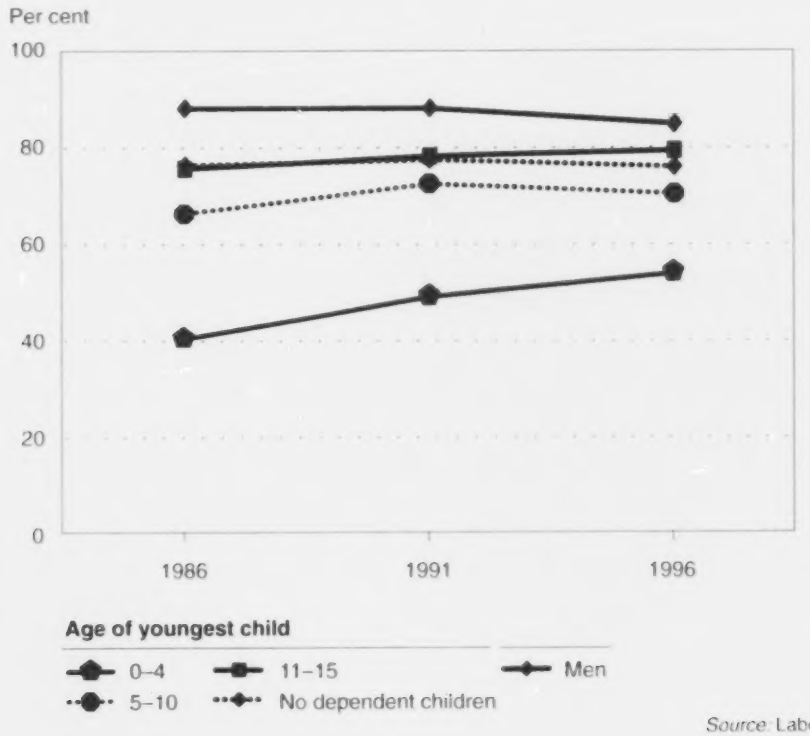
Great Britain, per cent

| | Women (16–59) | | | | | | Men (16–64) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All | With youngest dependent child aged | | | | Without dependent children | |
| | | 0–15 | 0–4 | 5–10 | 11–15 | | |
| **All aged 16–59/64** | **67** | **60** | **48** | **65** | **75** | **71** | **77** |
| **People aged** | | | | | | | |
| 16–24 | 59 | 29 | 29 | 33 | • | 64 | 62 |
| 25–39 | 68 | 58 | 52 | 64 | 73 | 86 | 85 |
| 40–49 | 76 | 73 | 51 | 69 | 79 | 79 | 86 |
| 50–59/64 | 61 | 58 | • | 48 | 62 | 61 | 66 |

• Less than 10,000 in cell: sample size too small for reliable estimate

*Source:* Labour Force Survey

**Figure 4:** Economic activity rates of women aged 16–59 by age of youngest dependent child 1986–1996; spring each year (not seasonally adjusted)




*Source:* Labour Force Survey

## Lack of information, advice and practical help

Studies consistently reveal that many women receive little or no information, advice and support to assist them in the transition from home to work and there are no obvious and visible routes they can follow to help them prepare for and obtain paid employment (Ryan and Vause Associates, 1993; Chwarae Teg, 1992; McGivney, 1994). Although there are some examples of good practice, comparatively few women who withdraw from the labour market subsequently obtain good advice and assistance in identifying a suitable training and career route. This applies even to professional women who have taken a career break. A study of women who had taken professional updating courses indicated that they had received very little help with the return to work from the professional associations of which they were members (Women Returners Network, 1995).

## Loss of contact with the labour market

A major problem facing women wishing to return to paid employment is the loss of contact with the labour market. In a study of actual and potential returners in Hampshire, 85 per cent of respondents had completely lost contact with the workplace; 80 per cent had no training while away from work and 83 per cent had not received any careers advice in their working life. A survey of local employers conducted for the same study showed that only 4 per cent had made any attempt to keep in contact with ex-employees (Dow Stoker, 1991). A study involving nearly 200 organisations in Wales revealed that managers did not consider the retention of female employees a priority. Not surprisingly, less than 50 per cent of women who withdrew from the labour market returned to work with their original employer after maternity leave (Chwarae Teg 1992).

## Downward mobility

A break from continuous full-time employment often has a negative overall impact on women's career and financial status. Employment structures, albeit ostensibly neutral, are tailored to the traditional career patterns of men, i.e. based on continuous, full-time working. Other modes of working are therefore seen as abnormal and sometimes described as 'atypical' despite their current prevalence. The interruptions to women's working life caused by maternity obliges many *'to move between different forms of work, from typical to atypical and possibly back again'* (Dickens, 1992). This has a detrimental impact on women's career opportunities and although the growth of part-time working has increased women's labour market participation and enabled them to have shorter breaks from the labour market, it has not led to significant improvement of their position in the labour market (Rajan, Gordon and Walsh, 1990). On the contrary, the increasing *'feminisation'* of the workforce has increased gender disparities in the labour market. Female domination of (often low paid) part-time jobs and the concentration of these within the service industries have reinforced occupational gender segregation and led to 'downward mobility' for many women returners. Analyses suggest that at least 30 per cent of those who return to work part-time are forced to take jobs at a lower level than they had before they withdrew from the labour market. Local studies show that employers typically recruit women returners to comparatively low-grade, part-time jobs in traditional female occupational areas (Fielder, Rees and Rees, 1991; Dow Stoker, 1991). This means that a large number of women are working beneath their qualifications and capacities and at levels below those at which men with similar qualifications are employed (Payne, 1991). Labour force data indicate that women part-time workers with qualifications are over-represented in semi-skilled and unskilled positions, reasonably well represented among junior managers but lag far behind full-time workers, particularly men, in senior management positions. One study found *'substantial evidence'* that employers discriminate against women in recruitment, promotion and training, even in female-dominated areas such as clerical and retail work (Meager and Williams, 1994).

Downward mobility occurs even among women returning to work at higher and professional grades. A survey of 800 managerial and professional women returning to their original employer after a career break revealed that those returning to work part-time were 25 per cent less likely to have been promoted than full-timers (although women who had moved from part- to full-time seemed to recover from this disadvantage). Part-timers also felt less positive about their access to training and development and less certain about their future career prospects. They had suffered a larger drop in career satisfaction and career ambition and felt that others saw them as less career-oriented and of lower potential (Hirsh *et al*, 1992). Although the women in this study were in relatively senior positions and had returned to their previous employers, the difficulties they experienced in relation to promotion and career development were largely similar to those experienced by many other women returning to work part-time. Not surprisingly, it is often found that female managers are far less likely to be married and to have children than male managers.

## Lack of recognition of existing experience and skills

Because of their varied paid and unpaid work experience, mature women accumulate a number of skills and experience:

> *Most work part-time often on an ad hoc basis over a period of years and many combine this with a wide variety of voluntary work. When linked to the skill acquired in caring for and managing families, the phrase 'working women' begins to suggest the broader profile of skills, experience and activities within the population of adult women* (DeBell, 1994).

Accreditation of prior learning and experience processes have repeatedly demonstrated that the multiple skills women develop in their unpaid work can be accredited up to Level 3 and that they are relevant to and overlap with those required in paid work (Rajan and Van Eupen, 1990). Awarding bodies such as the National Council for Vocational Qualifications allow unpaid work competences to be accredited towards a qualification. Many employers, however, are reluctant to recognise and accept this kind of evidence and women still experience difficulty in gaining employment that recognises their skills because of the rigid demarcation maintained between paid and unpaid work. Those attempting to return to the labour market frequently report difficulties in persuading employers of their abilities. A group who had undertaken Information Technology training in Coventry claimed that the energy, motivation and time management skills they had demonstrated in managing homes, bringing up children and undertaking training courses in their own time were ignored by employers when they went for interviews:

> *We've already proved ourselves by organising ourselves and our household to get this education. They should be able to see that but employers don't recognise that we've been motivated; we've got off our backsides. We've got the potential but they don't give us a chance. Look at me! If I can bring up four kids on my own I can tackle anything for any bugger!* (quoted in McGivney and Thomson, 1996).

The Women's National Commission (1992) claims that returners' career prospects are hindered by employers' assumption that they will leave work for family reasons and by the 'false notion' that what they learn from family life is of little value to their working lives.

## Limited training opportunities

Women's access to training and promotion at work is hampered by other negative employer assumptions, namely:

- That there is no need to provide training for people in low level jobs
- That it is not worth training older workers
- That part-time workers are not committed to the job and have no career ambitions. (McGivney, 1994; Bevan and Thompson, 1992).

Returners fall disproportionately into these three worker categories. Moreover, the kinds of employment many are obliged to take as a result of family responsibilities — low level part-time work, home-working, short contract, agency, casual and seasonal work — are those least likely to offer training and opportunities for advancement.

A national research report on women and training prepared for the DFEE (Callender and Metcalf, 1997) concluded that women's position in the labour market has a direct impact on their access to training. The study, which involved secondary analysis of the Spring 1994 Labour Force Survey, found that the factors that particularly reduce women's chances of receiving training are:

- being married or cohabiting;
- having children under the age of five and, especially, under the age of two
- being employed part-time.

These are, of course, characteristics of a large proportion of returners. Other studies (e.g. Green, 1991) have also found that married women and those with young children, are significantly less likely to receive employer-provided training than other employees, and all analyses indicate that there is a significant training gap between full-time, permanent employees and part-time workers, irrespective of factors such as length of service and qualifications (Green, 1991; Clarke, 1991; McGivney, 1994). Clarke (1991) identified occupational segregation as the principal contributor to gender differences in training provision, and part-time employment as the factor which most reduces women's training opportunities, regardless of occupation or level of job. The fact that part-time workers tend to be concentrated in smaller workplaces also contributes to the paucity of training opportunities for women.

Successive labour force surveys indicate that male part-time workers receive proportionally more employer-provided training than female part-timers. On the other hand, women full-time workers are slightly more likely than their male counterparts to receive work-related training. This has been attributed to women's greater distribution in the service industries which provide more training than other sectors, and the higher level of induction training for the increased number of women re-entering the labour market after a break (Clarke, 1991; Green, 1991, Callender and Metcalf, 1997). There are, however, variations according to age: women between the ages of 16 and 24 tend to receive less training than men while those aged over 35 receive slightly more.

## Lack of support during the re-entry process

A national study of women re-entering paid employment after a career break (Rajan and Van Eupen, 1990) found that only 14 per cent of employers were addressing the specific needs of this group and these were concerned more with commercial objectives than with helping women manage the re-entry process. Similar findings have emerged from local studies. A survey conducted for Oldham Training and Enterprise Council revealed that few local employers offered any support to working women (Ryan and Vause Associates, 1991), while the study of returners in Hampshire revealed a widespread perception among working women that employers discriminated against mothers and did not encourage personnel practices which helped them balance home and work life (Dow Stoker, 1991).

Large organisations with a high proportion of female workers have nevertheless recognised the importance of helping women manage the transition process. Rajan, Gordon and Walsh (1990) have identified four good practice models used in some larger organisations:

- *The retraining model*: re-entrants trained in skills relevant to either general employability or specific occupations or industries;
- *The refresher model*: re-entrants are given opportunities to update existing skills (particularly if they are returning to their former occupation) in order to re-establish them at the same or equivalent level at which they withdrew from the labour market;
- *The career advancement model*: re-entrants are given skills supplementary to those used in their previous posts in order to allow progression into managerial/supervisory positions in specialist work areas;
- *The prevention model*: withdrawal anticipated and prepared for, through the setting up of mechanisms for maintaining contact.

Although positive action programmes involving maternity, career break and promotion arrangements have been initiated in some 'leading edge' organisations which have signed up to

*Opportunity 2000* (a business-led initiative to help the progression of women employees), equal opportunity measures in other organisations have been small-scale and isolated (Pollert and Rees, 1992). Some were instigated at a time when the demographic downturn was causing worry about recruitment. Many firms have since reduced their labour force and abandoned positive action programmes. Others which claim to have equal opportunities policies contradict them in practice. A survey conducted in Scotland revealed that although a significant proportion of the 156 largest employers claimed to have a policy, only a quarter had it on paper and less than a fifth distributed copies to employees. In some, flexitime and enhanced maternity leave were only on offer to non-manual employees (*Everywoman*, 1993).

Since women are returning to the labour force in ever-increasing numbers, far more needs to be done to support this process. The first step, according to Ryan and Vause Associates (1993), would be to change some persisting employer assumptions, namely:

- That childcare is exclusively a mother's responsibility;
- That current childcare arrangements made by working women are satisfactory;
- That childcare is expensive and difficult to organise therefore should be of low priority;
- That the long-term family responsibilities that employees will have throughout their working lives are of no concern and relevance to employers;
- That there is no need to encourage women to aim for higher skilled work.

Rajan and Van Eupen (1990) list four criteria for good employer practice in relation to women re-entering paid employment after a career break:

- A clear corporate policy on returners and a mechanism for its implementation;
- Allowance made for female employees' family responsibilities;
- Flexible job arrangements that facilitate the return to work;
- Training and development arrangements that not only facilitate the return but also promote career advancement ( such as post induction training, career development opportunities, continuing training, attitudinal training for line managers).

It has been found that employers are more motivated to support and assist the progress of women employees when:

- They are working in shortage labour markets;
- They are experiencing difficulty in finding high quality managers;
- They have developed a strong culture favouring retention of good employees and a two-way concept of loyalty;
- Issues of equity and equal opportunities have a high profile in the organisation;
- Managers are personally committed to the issue;
- There are political or 'image' reasons for retaining career women (Rajan and Van Eupen, 1990).

In organisations where such considerations are not paramount, and which are not undergoing structural or technological change, the support and retention of women workers may not be a priority.

*Chapter 3*

# Returning to education and training

Although girls generally achieve better results at school than boys, there are some gender discrepancies at a later age. More women than men have no qualifications — 22 per cent compared with 16 per cent (DFEE, 1998b) — and male employees are generally offered more opportunities than female workers for gaining vocational qualifications. Men as a whole have higher level qualifications than women. Women are over-represented at NVQ Level 2 but under-represented at Level 4 and above. Analyses have shown that:

- Four fifths of all NVQs gained by women are in the clerical and secretarial area while men's awards are spread across a wider set of occupations. Women are poorly represented in NVQ awards in the craft and technical areas. They are also concentrated in the lower level grades (1 and 2), making up three quarters of all awards at level 1. Even in occupations where most workers are women (clerical work, service industries and sales) proportionately more men than women hold high level vocational qualifications (DoE, 1993a);
- Nursing, teaching and high level RSA qualifications are held mainly by women, whereas other vocational qualifications such as Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, BTEC Higher and National qualifications, City and Guilds advanced craft certificates and trade apprenticeship certificates are held predominately by men. This has led analysts to conclude that women face difficulties both in gaining entry to male-dominated occupational areas and in getting their skills formally recognised if they do gain entry (Centre for Labour Market Studies, 1994).

Women returners, especially those who have been outside the labour market for a lengthy period, inevitably experience a process of '*skills obsolescence*' (Rajan and Van Eupen, 1990). Many are aware of the importance of qualifications and recognise that they need training to help them acquire and refurbish their skills, especially in areas such as Information Technology. Most studies of returners reveal extremely positive attitudes to training among those who are not economically active. Research conducted by the south east Hampshire Local Employer Network indicated that at least 70 per cent of potential women returners considered further training as essential in order to re-enter the labour market at the desired level (cited in Dow Stoker, 1991). A survey conducted in Northern Ireland — a region with particularly high unemployment rates — showed that over 90 per cent of women who were not economically active were interested in work-related training (McCorry, 1990).

## Barriers to participation

However, many women return to work without preparatory training. There are a number of reasons for this, including:

- Insufficient information and guidance on training opportunities
- Insufficient targeted and suitable training opportunities in accessible local venues
- Domestic constraints – dearth of available or affordable childcare and elder care facilities
- Financial constraints – course fees and associated costs; benefit problems
- Psychological barriers
- Disincentives caused by women's position in the labour market.

## Insufficient information and guidance on opportunities

Most research studies have revealed that there is a lack of information on education and training specifically for returners. The Dow Stoker survey (1991) typically found that potential returners who were not already involved in training schemes generally had little awareness of local training opportunities and felt unable to judge the quality and relevance of the provision they did know about. Significant numbers of respondents in other local surveys have stated that they did not have access to information, help and advice on learning opportunities.

## Insufficient training programmes

Surveys indicate that the demand for training expressed by returners is rarely matched by supply and it has been alleged that *'a huge number of women end up in a no training trap'* (Clarke, 1991).

The Equal Opportunities Commission (1990) identified a strong but unmet need for part-time training among women with family commitments who wished to return to paid employment. Although many education providers offer some education and training courses specifically for women (details of which are outlined in Section 4), these are unevenly distributed throughout the country, are often of short-term duration, and usually have a limited number of places. Many are funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), a vital source of funding for women's training as it is the only one to earmark funds specifically for women-only programmes. There are no government training policies specifically targeted at women and fewer non-working women than men achieve access to government training schemes because they are not registered unemployed, in receipt of Job Seekers' Allowance or classified as 'actively seeking work'. This is reflected in the fact that only 30 per cent of trainees participating in the *Training for Work* programme are women. National schemes to increase qualifications and skills such as *Investors in People* and the National Targets for Education and Training do not have special provisions for women who have temporarily left the labour market and fail to recognise their unequal access to training and vocational development.

The evidence suggests that few policy-makers and education and training providers fully appreciate the range of obstacles that impede women's return to education or training. A survey conducted in the East Anglia region found *'disappointingly little'* training provision which met the criteria for *'women-friendly training'*. This was defined as training that meets at least two of the following criteria:

- time/location appropriate to carers;
- no cost barrier;
- tutor/trainer with awareness of equal opportunities;
- courses which include careers counselling and/or confidence building
- marketing/recruitment geared to women (Sanderson, 1992).

## Domestic constraints

The importance, for women with caring commitments, of having training opportunities within reasonable reach of their homes and timed within school hours, is highlighted in all research, as is the need for good quality childcare.

As with the return to employment, the age of her children has a significant influence on a woman's readiness to contemplate or undertake training. Lack of affordable childcare facilities is identified in all studies of returners as one of the biggest obstacles to their re-entry to work, education or training. In the Chwarae Teg survey (1992), 88 per cent of respondents not in training said they would take a training course if childcare were available. However, there are comparatively few training courses supported by childcare (Clarke, 1991; Payne, 1991; Coats, 1994). A survey conducted by the Equal Opportunities Commission showed that less than 20 per cent of TECs had undertaken any specific childcare-supported training initiatives (EOC, 1993). In mainstream education institutions, childcare is often perceived as a the exclusive responsibility of women, and although some now provide some facilities, they are rarely sufficient to meet demand. Further Education Funding Council criteria do, however, allow help with the costs of childcare for some categories of full-time student — those who are in receipt of means-tested state benefit or the Job Seekers' Allowance; those who are unwaged and dependent on the same benefits as those undertaking adult basic education or English for speakers of other languages programmes. This assistance is not provided for part-time students. Since 1995/6 the FEFC scheme has also allowed colleges to claim additional funding if they provide free creche facilities or meet 100 per cent of the childcare costs incurred by a student. The FEFC spent £3m in 1995/6 and an estimated £4m in 1996/7 on this provision. More recently the Government has announced that, through the national childcare strategy, it is making an extra £5m available during the financial year 1998/9 for the provision of extra childcare facilities attached to colleges for children aged 4 and over (DfEE, 1998c).

## Financial constraints

Women are significantly more likely to pay for their own work-related education and training than men and they are less likely than men to be sponsored by employers for off-the-job education and training programmes (Women's National Commission, 1991, NACETT, 1997). However, many experience difficulties in meeting education and training costs and a study for the Equal Opportunities Commission (Clarke, 1991) identified financial considerations as one of the greatest obstacles confronting women seeking or undertaking training. Women generally earn less than men and returners in particular are perceived by employers in some sectors as 'low cost segments' of the labour force (Lindley, 1994). In 1995, female manual workers earned 73 per cent of male manual workers' wages and female non-manual workers earned 68 per cent of male non-manual workers' pay (DfEE, 1997). Despite this, student funding arrangements are based on the assumption that men and women have equal resources and expectations and the patterns of women's adult lives and their unequal chances in the labour market are disregarded.

Women's financial position inevitably has a bearing on their ability to take advantage of education and training opportunities. A survey of people seeking training in the Norfolk and Waveney area (DeBell and Davies, 1991) showed that women seeking training were in many cases in low skilled, poorly paid jobs and lacked the funds to train for better jobs. They were frequently deterred not just by course fees but by additional costs such as examination fees, bus fares and childcare charges as well as the costs of books and other necessary materials. The level of fees for long certificated courses were obliging some to take less useful short courses, but the costs of these could also be a problem, especially if full

fee payment was required in advance. Some had experienced resistance from their partners to spending money on their own training and many did not feel they had the right to use family money on themselves.

The costs involved in taking vocational qualifications can also present a barrier. Although tax relief is available for those undertaking NVQs at their own expense, the costs of NVQ assessment are high and may deter women on low incomes and those who are reluctant to use family budgets for their own purposes. It has been found that the costs of obtaining an assessment or prior learning are also too high for some women (DeBell, 1994).

The evidence indicates that women are less likely to borrow than men and they have taken out fewer student and Career Development loans. Payne (1991) suggests that women's reluctance to borrow is understandable given their disadvantaged position in the labour market:

> *Women would be justified in putting their own financial position and that of their families at risk only if they could be sure of secure and well paid employment afterwards. Women's family commitments and the casualised nature of much of the employment that is open to them mean that their expectations can never be as confident in this regard as men's.*

Other sources of financial help for women seeking education or training have dwindled. Part-time students do not qualify for mandatory grant support and financial support mechanisms for adult learners such as local authority discretionary awards and fee concessions have been considerably eroded as a result of public expenditure cuts.

## Psychological barriers

As argued in an earlier study (McGivney, 1993), the attitudes and self-perceptions of women often act as a significant barrier to their participation in education and training. Virtually all studies of women returners comment on their lack of confidence, low aspirations and expectations. These barriers are interrelated with the practical obstacles women experience since they spring from the same source: traditional, gender-based attitudes and assumptions and a continuing ambivalence towards women's participation outside the domestic domain. Women's ability of to participate in education or training is affected by three practical considerations — lack of finance, lack of childcare facilities and constraints on personal mobility. These restrictions stem from women's domestic work as carers and homemakers. Although caring and homemaking are constantly extolled as women's natural and primary roles, those who perform these duties receive little social and economic support: on the contrary, they incur significant financial and career penalties when they withdraw from the labour market. They also incur a 'status penalty' since society neither values nor rewards women's unpaid work in home management and childrearing and there is still little recognition of the skills involved in these complex tasks. This, not unnaturally, undermines women's confidence in their own skills and capabilities which leads to poor self-esteem and low expectations, as illustrated in the often-heard, self-disparaging comment: *'I'm only a housewife and mother'*. This in turn has the effect of lowering women's expectations and aspirations. Thus, the 'external' practical and material barriers that many women experience are closely related to the internal ones — lack of confidence and self-esteem — since both arise directly out of their undervalued role as unpaid homemakers and carers. Many of the factors that prevent women from undertaking education or training are thus interlinked manifestations of a continuing ambivalence about their role in society.

One of the consequences of this ambivalence is the sense of guilt felt by many women who return, or wish to return, to education or employment:

> *To seek education or training, even to contemplate a return to employment unless it is financially necessary, for some women is seen as neglecting the family and pursuing their own selfish ends. If that education or training costs money, it is even more likely to be unacceptable. The feeling of guilt never leaves a woman who reduces her domestic commitment by re-entering education or training or returning to paid work. It surges to the fore every time a child is ill or there is a clash of commitments* (Coats, 1994).

## Disincentives caused by women's position in the labour market

Attitudes to training are also influenced by women's position in the labour market. The combination of discontinuous employment patterns, low earnings and restricted range of occupations both reinforces low expectations and aspirations and reduces access to career development opportunities.

> *Women without jobs and with only poor jobs do not have effective access to training to enable them to get better jobs. Even if they do obtain training, access to continuing career-related training depends on adult and childcare provision to make it possible, good contractual conditions (especially regarding part-time work) to make it beneficial and open occupational structures, free of segmentation, to make it sustainable.(...) Discriminatory payment systems undermine women's initial returns to employment and training, bias household decisions in favour of men working, and reduce the incentives to build up more human capital on which to base further career development* (Lindley, in Lindley *(ed)* 1992).

A study of attitudes to training (Fuller and Saunders, 1990) found that unskilled and semi-skilled workers involved in production/assembly work and retailing jobs did not see the relevance of training to the jobs they were doing and did not associate it with better performance or promotion as most were employed in firms where there was little chance of progressing beyond a certain level. Similarly, a project investigating the training of part-time workers (McGivney, 1994) found that those who were working in semi-skilled areas were often deterred from seeking training because there were no possibilities for upward progression within the organisation. This study found that women's attitudes to training and career development differed according the ages of their children as well as to their current or former job level. Greatest interest in training was expressed by:

- women working (or who formerly worked) in higher grade positions;
- those who had previously been registered as unemployed;
- those with qualifications;
- those currently undertaking work-related training;
- those with older, school-aged children;
- those who felt they are working beneath their capacities.

Least interest in training was expressed by:

- women who had just returned to employment after a period of maternity leave;
- women with pre-school children (although many of these thought they would be interested in returning to education or training in the future).

# Types and characteristics of education and training for women returners

Various types of education and training programmes have been established specifically for women returning to education and training. Coats (1994) has categorised these as:

- Updating (including professional updating) programmes;
- *'Reorientation'* courses (e.g. *Back to Work*, *New or Wider Opportunities for Women*, *Freshstart*, *New Steps*, *New Horizons*, *Second Chance*, etc);
- Positive action programmes offering training in non-traditional skills (e.g. engineering, electronics) or preparing women for entry to higher grade positions (e.g. *Women into Management*);
- Informal, community-based learning activities;
- Preparatory programmes (e.g. *Return to Study*, pre-access or pre-vocational courses).

These types of courses are provided, with support from national, local and European funding sources, by further and higher education institutions, Training and Enterprise Councils, local education authorities, the WEA, other voluntary organisations and women's projects and centres.

Most further education colleges have some courses for women returning to the labour market and some offer non-traditional training provision or targeted guidance and assessment initiatives. Some local councils also fund provision for women returners. The Economic Development Directorate of Coventry City Council, for example, has funded training courses for unwaged women delivered by colleges and local organisations. The Women Returners Network has produced very useful regional directories of the education and training opportunities targeted at women returners in particular localities.

## Training and Enterprise Councils

Many Training and Enterprise Councils have also provided special programmes and information events for returners and about 20 have entered into partnership with the Women Returners Network (WRN). TEC initiatives for women have typically included:

- Back to work and updating courses;
- One day information events;
- Targeted information, advice and guidance;
- Job search facilities for returners;
- Local research into women returners' training and employment needs;

- Resourcing of centres, networks and groups to support women's courses and information needs;
- Establishment of equal opportunities posts;
- Publication of equal opportunities packs and publications;
- Accreditation of unpaid work experience
- Childcare provision and investigations into local childcare needs;
- Help for women's enterprise initiatives;
- Initiatives for specific groups such as black women and rural women;
- Roadshows and mobile training units for women.

(EOC, 1993; Women Returners' Network (WRN) newsletters)

To give an illustration of TEC practice, Tyneside TEC has funded a series of courses and events for women returners with some European funding assistance. These have included *Wider Horizon* days, *Stepping Stones* taster courses, *First Step Back* and *Freshstart* courses. The *Freshstart* programme led to NVQs and included a work placement. Participants received an allowance and there was financial help with travel and childcare for lone parents. The courses had a good record in helping women gain qualifications, find work and progress to further education or training. However, they were phased out in 1993–94 to avoid continued dependency on ESF funding and the programme then became part of the *Tyneskill Prospects* scheme. Women eligible to participate (under the *Returners to the Labour Market* criterion) benefit from flexible conditions enabling them to take time off to look after children in school holidays or to care for sick relatives.

Since 1991, the TEC has helped to create more than 1,000 childcare places for school-age children through after-school and holiday clubs. There are two Out of School Care consortia in Tyneside and a consortium of eleven clubs in Gateshead , supported by the TEC and the local authority. These have helped a number of women to start or continue training and enter or remain in work (Information from Tyneside TEC).

Another example of TEC help for returners is the *Women into Work* programme funded by Oldham TEC, the design of which was informed by preliminary research into local women's experience and needs (Ryan and Vause Associates, 1993). The aims of the programme are to support women in the transition from home to paid work; to help them identify their aptitudes, skills and abilities; to give the confidence and competence to pursue paid work activities and to help them recognise and take advantage of available opportunities. The programme is student-centred, flexible, supportive and based on women's existing experience and skills. It includes personal profiling, identification of existing skills, time management, communication skills, management of change, employment and self-employment opportunities, goal setting, CVs, job applications and interviews, role play, Information Technology, health and safety at work, assertiveness and stress management. Participants are encouraged to prepare a portfolio of evidence towards achieving the RSA Enterprise Skill profile.

The TEC also supports a local *Opportunities for Women Centre* which offers training programmes and information and advice on childcare, jobs and career development, personal development, training opportunities, self-employment, education, qualifications and sources of funding (Ryan and Vause Associates, 1993).

Despite these and other instances of good practice, TEC provision for returners as a whole is patchy. The Equal Opportunities Commission's (1993) investigation into the publicly-funded

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vocational training system in England and Wales found that the TECs most likely to provide for this group were those with chief executives and board members who strongly supported equal opportunities. However, there was often a significant mismatch between a TEC's stated remit and the action taken. Although 89 per cent of those which responded to the enquiry had a corporate objective relating to widening access to training provision, fewer than 10 per cent had a specific equal opportunities objective. While most acknowledged the need to address the problem of childcare, only 17 per cent had mounted specific childcare-supported training initiatives. Respondents claimed that the difference between intention and practice was due to the nature of their contract with the government and to funding cuts which had led to the curtailment of some programmes and initiatives aimed at returners and a greater concentration of resources on priority groups such as the registered unemployed.

The Commission concluded that TECs were constrained in following equal opportunities objectives by the omission from priority groups of those not registered as unemployed and by the lack of priority attached to providing programmes for returners or women seeking training in non-traditional areas. Another constraint identified was the way in which TECS are funded, according to which a percentage of payments are withheld until certain outcomes are achieved. This tempts them to select as trainees those individuals who are most likely to achieve NVQs and job placements. Many of the TECs that responded to the enquiry referred to the disincentives caused by the outcome-related funding system (EOC, 1993).

## Women's Projects and Centres

Because of the deficiencies of mainstream education and training, women have frequently been obliged to establish their own programmes. Drawing on a range of national, local and European funding sources, women's education and training centres have been established in Liverpool, Leeds, Nottingham, London, Wales and elsewhere:

> *Women returners are diverse in terms of their education, training and labour market experience but tend to share many characteristics which traditionally education and training systems have been ill-equipped to accommodate: loss of confidence, outdated substantive skills, domestic responsibilities, and inability to pay substantial fees and travel costs. Those initiatives which have responded best have tended to be organised by women themselves in the voluntary sector* (Istance and Rees, 1994).

Key features of women's projects and centres are informality, flexibility, and recognition, in programme design and delivery, of women's diversity, their prior experience and the many constraints that limit their autonomy and choices. The nervousness and diffidence many women feel when they return to education or training after a period of family formation is taken account of in teaching methods and support arrangements. However, despite their undisputed value, women's education and training projects characteristically lead a precarious existence on short-term funding. Current funding criteria have made it particularly difficult for voluntary groups to provide the kind of informal and unaccredited programmes that encourage and enable women to out a toe in the water before making a formal return to learning.

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Although there are many examples of good practice, the evidence suggests that education and training provision for women returners is, in general:

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- insufficient to meet demand;
- uncoordinated and unevenly distributed around the country;
- insecurely (often short-term) funded;
- limited in the subject and occupational areas covered;
- often lacking in childcare support (Clarke 1991 and 1994).

So what forms and types of provision might best serve the needs of this large and diverse group of the population?

*Chapter 5*

# Returners' education and training needs

The education and training needs of women returners vary widely according to their circumstances, qualification level and aspirations. As Coats (1994) has pointed out, returners include several different groups:

- Women who need to return to paid work as soon as possible due to a change in circumstances or because they know exactly what they want to do and have the necessary qualifications to do it;
- Women who intend to return to paid employment in the near future but need first to improve their qualifications, compensate for earlier under-achievement or seek an appropriate vocational direction;
- Women who already have a qualification or skill in a particular occupation but who are out of touch with recent developments or new equipment in their particular field.

Although each of these groups has specific training requirements, they are also likely to have some shared needs regardless of their educational and occupational background.

## Information and advice

All studies suggest that the majority of returners receive little advice and informed help before returning to employment. Many of those seeking to re-enter the labour market gain their information on job and training opportunities from local radio, the local press and other people rather than careers services or Job Centres. The first need of most returners is therefore for accessible (and free), targeted information and guidance on appropriate education, training and employment opportunities.

## Broad and appropriate training programmes

### *Vocational skills*

Most women want training in traditional female occupational areas, with updating in office skills, information technology, business education and training for the caring professions particularly popular. Women returners choose traditional female occupational areas for understandable reasons which are largely based on cultural conditioning and their perception of realities of the labour market. Traditional areas such as clerical, secretarial and retail sales are often the only employment options available for them (Fielder, Rees and Rees, 1991). Moreover, Government-funded programmes such as *Training for Work* and those for younger adults tend to reflect and reinforce gender segregation in the labour market by providing training in traditional female occupational

areas. Rees (1997) argues that current training arrangements and guidance developments tend to consolidate women's position in lower paid, traditionally female occupations. She points out that the vast majority of sandwich, block and day release students are male and the eligibility criteria for many TEC-run employment training programmes exclude many married women. At the same time, outcome-related funding and the stress on placements in the Careers and guidance services *'encourages a built-in bias towards steering people into safe, gender -appropriate choices'* (Rees, 1997).

Studies have revealed some of the problems women and girls experience when they try to enter non-traditional fields. Those who do manage to break into male-dominated occupations tend to be young and childless with good school experience and some qualifications (McGivney, 1991; Payne, 1991). Older women with a shorter working life ahead of them understandably play safe by seeking to improve or update existing skills rather than trying to enter a completely new field where they may not succeed.

To improve women's employment options, however, it is essential that they be offered more training and encouragement to enter occupational areas in which they are regionally or nationally under-represented. Enterprise training is also important for women living in areas where jobs are scarce. For women living in rural areas, self-employment may be the most realistic option.

### *Core and general skills*

As well as training in specific vocational skills, returners require a basic programme which includes:

- Updating of existing skills;
- Confidence-building and assertiveness;
- Basic skills;
- Communication skills;
- Training in new technology;
- Action-Planning;
- Job search and self-presentation skills;
- Identification of existing skills and experience, portfolio-building and opportunities to have unpaid work accredited towards NVQs or other awards;
- Opportunities to acquire vocational qualifications.

Qualifications are extremely important in today's labour market. All labour force data show that people without or with very low qualifications are in a very disadvantaged position compared with others in relation to job acquisition and retention. Training programmes for women returners, therefore, should, wherever possible, offer opportunities for accrediting their achievements towards a nationally recognised qualification.

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The most effective training programmes for women returners have a range of components. Some of these can be classified as essential, others as desirable.

**Essential components** of programmes for returners are:

*Information and guidance* on education, training and employment options; other sources of help and advice; financial matters; welfare benefit issues.

*Clear progression routes: 'There is an urgent need for routes of progression for women returners to be set up within education and training systems. These should run alongside guidance and counselling to prevent women taking up posts below their potential from which there are no opportunities for training or promotion'* (Istance and Rees, 1994).

*Preparation for the realities of the labour market.* Many surveys have identified a mismatch between women returners' desire to return to work and the availability of acceptable jobs. It can take far longer than expected to find employment. Training therefore needs to encourage persistence and an ability to take rejection, otherwise it risks raising hopes and expectations that may be unfulfilled. It should also raise awareness of the pitfalls of the labour market. Evaluation of returners' courses in Tyneside revealed that some of the women who had subsequently found jobs had encountered a number of unforeseen difficulties:

> *Low wages, inflexible (and sometimes long) hours and poor working conditions (especially for part-time workers) are key problems. Further, many of the respondents had found temporary work and complained of the treatment they receive from employers, particularly when contracts were terminated at very short prior notice. Some respondents had not been aware initially of the temporary nature of the work they had been offered.* (Focus on Women Consultancy, 1994)

Although respondents to the Tyneside evaluation stated that the courses they had attended had vastly increased their motivation and confidence, they felt that they could have done more to prepare them for such difficulties, in particular, the length of time it might take to achieve suitable employment (*Focus on Women Consultancy*, 1994).

Those providing training for returners cannot assume that women will subsequently join a continuous career path. They may move in and out of the labour market according to employment and family circumstances. Advice on how to prepare for this and keep in contact with the workplace during periods of absence could also usefully be included in action planning.

***Desirable* components** of training programmes for returners would be:

*Work placements.* Work placements are a very effective way of preparing women for the re-entry process, particularly those who have not been in paid employment for a considerable period of time. Placements provide:

- A bridge between training and employment;
- Preparation for the transition from the home to the workplace;
- The opportunity for women to learn about new working practices and re-establish workplace disciplines;
- A 'foot in the door' and an employer reference, both of which can help women who might find it difficult to get a job because of age and lack of paid work experience to obtain subsequent employment;
- The opportunity for employers to experience the skills of mature and motivated women.

Recognition of the lack of contact between potential returners and employers has led one further education college to establish a scheme that brings together local employers needing skilled workers and women looking for subsidised skills training and jobs. Participating employers sponsor training places for returners who are seeking training in the kind of skills they need in their businesses. The programme involves a mixture of placements and training blocks (Record, 1991).

*Financial preparation.* If women are receiving welfare benefits, the move to a low waged job can create financial and practical problems for which they need to be adequately prepared. According to a person running foundation training courses in Coventry:

> *The transition from Income Support to being waged is very difficult and complicated. People may have to spend periods without any money. They need all the support they can get through this period. We have to tell people who are thinking of applying for Family Credit that they may be no better off, but personal gains such as increased self-confidence may be very important if they're thinking of working full-time in the future. If their reasons are purely financial they'll be putting themselves under more stress* (quoted in McGivney and Thomson, 1996).

*Preparation for progression to other education/training courses.* Many women return to learning in informal foundation programmes offered by small centres and voluntary organisations. Here they often gain the confidence to proceed to higher level education and training. However, the transition from a small community centre to a large institution is not always easy. The cultural gap between voluntary organisations and colleges or other education institutions can come as a shock to former trainees. Some find that the degree of support they received during the foundation training, particularly in relation to finance, childcare and bilingual support, is not matched in formal education institutions Many also find that they miss the flexible, interactive and student-centred style of learning they experienced in community organisations. In addition, the levels and demands of courses are sometimes higher than expected, suggesting a need for more intermediate programmes. The evaluation of courses for returners in Tyneside showed that many of those who had progressed to further training encountered severe difficulties, largely relating to the lack of support they received in further education colleges (Focus on Women Consultancy, 1994).

*Personal guidance and support.* Women returning to education or training after a period of exclusive domesticity often undergo a significant process of change. For many, involvement in activities outside the home, together with increasing confidence, leads to sometimes painful adjustments in personal relationships and family roles: *'a critical problem is feelings of guilt about neglecting family responsibilities and tensions experienced when partners find it difficult to accommodate the way in which education has changed their lives'* (Istance and Rees, 1994). The support of an all-women group often helps women through this period but so, crucially, does the help and support of tutors who can provide sensitive and empathetic counselling.

*Contributions from 'role models'.* Having as tutors or guest speakers women who have made a successful transition back to paid employment can be a significant spur to other women, especially if they share characteristics such as age, ethnic background and personal background.

*Follow-up and continuity of support.* Since so many jobs for women are now temporary and short-term, former trainees may need continuing advice and assistance. Thus it is important for providers to keep in contact with trainees and to offer post training guidance and support. Some training schemes and organisations provide drop-in facilities where former trainees can continue to meet informally and obtain information and advice. Some also hold regular reunions and keep in touch with former trainees through newsletters.

## Practical support

It is not just the content of training that is important for returners but the whole 'package'. The support structures, the learning environment and the general ambience are as important as the content and quality of the technical training and information provided.

Because of their specific situation, many returners prefer women-only training programmes designed to take account of the many practical barriers they face. Because of their domestic commitments and problems with transport, many women also require courses in the immediate locality. In rural areas where there are few or no college outreach facilities, some providers have organised mobile provision and study groups linked to distance learning.

Women with family commitments and part-time jobs need flexible, part-time programmes and many would be helped to participate by the provision of more courses organised on a roll-on, roll-off basis. Sanderson and Turner (1991) also found that modularised courses attracted a high proportion of women. Although some analysts also call for more open or distance learning facilities for women, there is evidence that many potential returners prefer a group learning situation.

Programmes for women returners need to include some form of childcare support or financial help towards childcare. As well as a need for pre school provision, there is a huge demand for after-school and holiday childcare facilities.

Programmes for returners should be free or low-cost for those on low incomes. Women on benefits have little disposable income and those who are dependent on male partners often have no independent money and may be unable or reluctant to use family money for their own purposes.

Some informal, pre-entry courses should be provided for women who are not ready, able or prepared to join more formal and certificated programmes. Many women take their first steps back into education via informal learning activities provided in familiar local venues. These can help immeasurably in building confidence and self-esteem, relieving isolation and encouraging a subsequent move into further education and training. Women returners who have engaged in community-based programmes have described the major gain as significantly increased confidence, as a result of which they have developed wider interests and raised their aspirations (McGivney, 1991; 1993). Unfortunately, changes brought about by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, cuts in public expenditure, and increasing use of outcome-related funding systems have resulted in a reduction in the number of general, uncertificated learning programmes available to women. Thus an important access route into education and training has been eroded.

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*Chapter 6*

# Concluding observations

Although women returners are returning to paid employment in increasing numbers, their overall position in the labour market has not significantly improved. The part-time and low paid nature of many women's jobs, the persisting gap between men's and women's pay and continuing gender segregation in the labour market are indications that increased participation in the workforce has not been accompanied by greater gender equality in employment. There are still disparities in the level and nature of vocational qualifications held by men and women and many employers attach little priority to retaining female staff, recruiting returners, supporting their transition back to work and training them to their full potential. As a result, many women lose all contact with the labour market when they take a career break and receive little support in planning and preparing for the return to work. Many receive little training and upskilling when they return to work, particularly if they return to a low level part-time job.

There is a strong link between women's position in the labour market and the amount and nature of learning opportunities available to them. Secondary analysis of data produced by the International Adult Literacy Study, which involved 12 nations, showed that in the UK two out of three adult learners participate in learning programmes supported by a employer (Rubenson, 1998). This leads to wide disparities and inequalities as it leaves a number of people unprovided for, notably, *those outside the labour market, those in undemanding jobs and those in small or medium-sized organisations*. These categories include, predominantly, women.

There an obvious tension between the tendency of many employers to recruit women to lower skilled and lower paid jobs in order to keep labour costs down and industry's alleged need for workers with qualifications and skills. In view of the increasing importance of women to the labour force and frequent calls from government and industry for workers with higher skill levels, it would make economic sense to ensure that women who have been obliged to leave the labour market for family reasons stay in contact with the world of work and have access to training opportunities and appropriate levels of employment:

> *There are losses associated not only with the quantitative under-utilisation but with the qualitative under-utilisation of women in employment (...) Many women returners suffer occupational downgrading and as a result make a lesser contribution to the economy than that of which they are capable. This represents a clear under-utilisation of a major component of the nation's workforce which is likely to generate a significant (albeit unquantifiable) economic cost* (Meager and Williams, 1994).

If there is to be any significant change in the skill and qualification levels of the national labour force, many employers will need to change their attitudes and practices with regard to women returners and provide them with appropriate training opportunities irrespective of whether they

work full- or part-time. The denial of training and development to many part-time employees is a situation that needs urgently to be addressed. At the same time, many women returners need to raise their aspirations and qualification levels. However, if employers continue to recruit them to part-time, low-skilled and low-paid jobs with no prospect of advancement and few training opportunities, then there will be little encouragement or incentive for women to raise their sights and seek higher skills and qualifications. They will consequently remain marginalised as a labour reserve.

Developments that would help women in their transitions between home and the workplace would be:

*A national framework for training* that would encourage employers to make a greater investment in the development and upskilling of all their workforce.

*Changes in funding and eligibility criteria of government-funded programmes.* The requirement for trainees to achieve NVQ levels and jobs is very difficult for people who have been out of education and employment for lengthy periods. Many returners are excluded from these schemes as they need pre-training and confidence-building before they are ready to join them.

*The expansion of information and guidance services.* The provision of *targeted*, free, information and advice on progression routes to training, education and employment for women who have withdrawn from the labour market for family reasons should be a priority. While the new national telephone hotline, *Learning Direct*, may assist in this process, changing economic conditions — *'the dynamism of the labour market, the impact of new technologies and the increasingly short shelf-life of many skills and occupations'* (Istance and Rees, 1994) — require the creation of special mechanisms to facilitate the transition from home to the labour market. Local information and guidance services with a member of staff specialising in issues for women returners are essential.

*A nationally co-ordinated policy for training returners.* Despite many examples of good practice, education and training provision for returners reflects adult learning provision in general in being uncoordinated and piecemeal, with the extent, nature and quality of provision varying enormously between geographical areas. Although some groups such as lone parents and others who come under the *New Deal* arrangements will have greater access to education and training, there is still a shortage of full- and part-time courses for women who have spent time at home caring for dependents. Some analysts have proposed that examples of best practice, many of which have been short-term and European-funded, be properly evaluated and brought into the mainstream of education and training (Istance and Rees, 1994; Clarke, 1991).

A national strategy for women returners would be assisted by the explicit inclusion of women who have temporarily left the labour force in initiatives such as *Investors In People* and the National Targets for Education and Training.

*Collaboration between education and training providers and employers in helping women back into suitable employment.* Local strategies for returners need to take account of both the needs of women and the character of the local labour market. Collaboration between guidance and training providers and employers in providing job placements, sponsorship and other activities that bridge the gap between women who have taken a career break and the workplace, can simultaneously give returners an insight into current employment practices and supply employers with evidence of the skills and potential within this very important section of the national workforce.

*Greater recognition, in education and training policy and planning, of the barriers many returners face in returning to training and employment.* All research on returners highlights the difficulties many face in returning to education, training and jobs. Whatever the focus of education and training programmes, the nature of delivery (timing, location, duration) is crucial, as is the provision of support to help women overcome the various practical difficulties they experience.

*More action on childcare.* The national childcare strategy including more funds for childcare in higher education, increased provision of after-school and holiday care clubs and help for lone mothers who want to return to employment, is greatly welcomed. However, overall there are still far too few affordable childcare options for working mothers. It is repeatedly pointed out that the lack of publicly-funded childcare facilities in Britain remains one of the greatest barriers for women seeking employment and training. The additional funding provided by the Government to create new childcare places in further education colleges and external institutions is a very useful development for women returning to education and training.

*Financial help.* More sources of funding are required to enable unwaged and low paid women to gain training and qualifications. There is abundant evidence that women have greater difficulty paying for and obtaining sponsorship for training than men, and that those with families often have little money for their own use. Education and training funding arrangements should take some account of women's inferior financial position compared to that of men, their discontinuous career paths and the continuing, even worsening, sex-segregated nature of the labour market which relegates them to lower job and skill levels.

It should be stressed that the elimination of all the structural barriers that hinder returners' access to education and training will not by itself transform their position in the labour market. There will also have to be a profound change in cultural assumptions and attitudes if women are to play their full part in economic development.

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# RETURNING WOMEN

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*Veronica McGivney*

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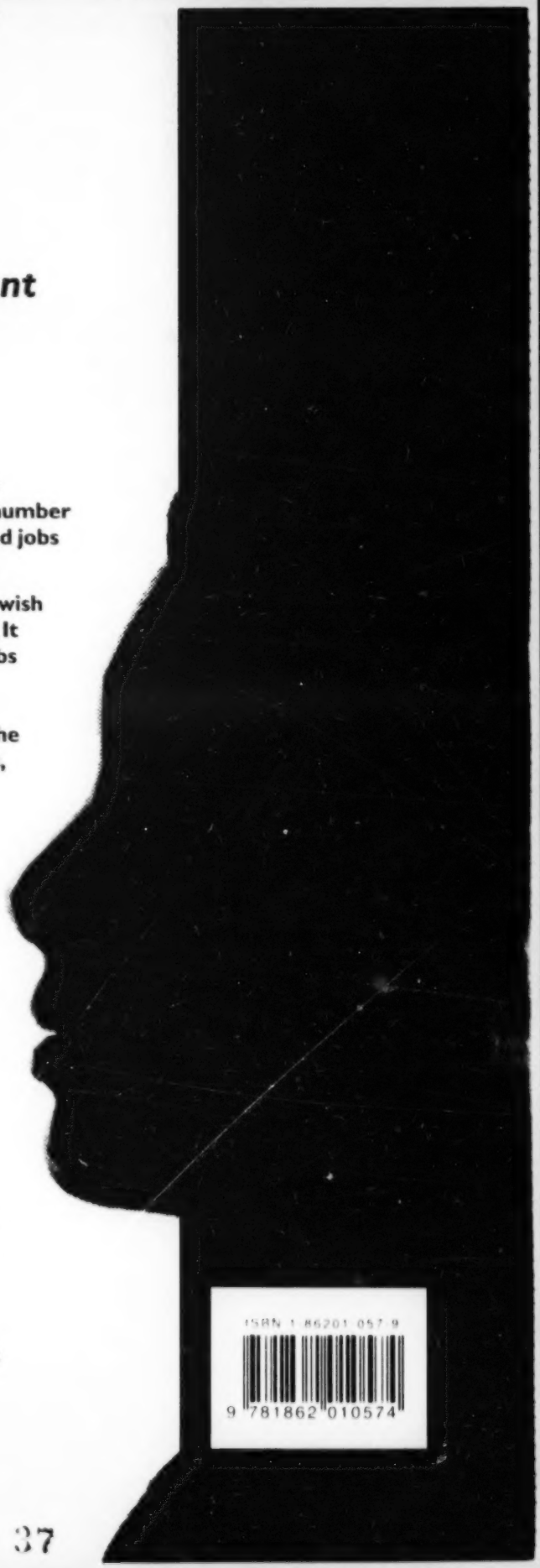

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